

## The Changing South of Gene Patterson; Journalism of Civil Rights, 1960-1968

*Edited by Roy Peter Clark and Raymond Arsenault (A volume in the Southern Dissent series, edited by Stanley Harrold and Randall M. Miller, the University Press of Florida.)*

**By Joe Marren**

Lester Maddox and Strom Thurmond, two men who strongly and publicly opposed desegregation and civil rights from the 1940s to almost their dying days, passed away in June 2003. God rest their souls, but it would be naïve to believe that the uncivil wrongs those men once advocated were also buried with them. There are still pockets of like believers from Maine to Florida and places in-between where the word Negro is linked with inferior and people think state's rights outweigh civil rights.

This may not be a fair comparison to make, but I can't ignore the fact that Gene Patterson worked hard to undo the work of the lackeys of people like Maddox and Thurmond. As editor of the Atlanta Constitution from 1960-68, he wrote a daily column (that's right, DAILY) that persuaded, cajoled and scolded others to see that the idea and the time had come to treat African-Americans as fellow citizens of this wonderful land. That simple – some would argue revolutionary – concept of the time and place would have branded Patterson an "outside agitator," or "commie," had he not been from the South himself. Patterson is as Southern as grits and magnolia trees.

In nine years at the helm of one of the South's leading newspapers, he wrote about 3,200 columns. From that rich mine, Roy Peter Clark and Raymond Arsenault culled 120 to show that Patterson not only inherited a rich tradition of dissent and sense, but also lead with his own words and views. For Patterson's audience wasn't the liberals of Manhattan, but the farmers of the red Georgia soil and the workers in the posh urban centers of a new and rising South.

The bustling Atlanta of that time billed itself as a city "too busy to hate." Maybe so, maybe not, but there were others in and around Fulton County and in places like Birmingham, Ala., who were all too ready to hate. In September 1963, four girls died when a Birmingham church was bombed. Patterson's column eloquently and simply mourned the girls and called upon other white Southerners to cast aside their complacency and work for a better America.

*"A Negro mother wept in the street Sunday morning in front of a Baptist church in Birmingham. In her hand she held a shoe, one shoe, from the foot of her dead child. We hold that shoe with her."*

Walter Cronkite later asked Patterson to read the column live on the CBS Evening News.

The column, however, is just one of many that Patterson crafted when he sought to be a voice of reason in unreasonable times. The book chronicles his best efforts in order from the first to the last. Patterson also offers something for lagniappe – a few words written from St. Petersburg, Fla., in June 2001, reminding us that the struggle for common sense and common decency goes on.

What also marks the book as a valued source are essays by Clark and Arsenault that offer a national and historical perspective on Patterson's work. Also included is an essay by Howell Raines, formerly of the New York Times, and an interview with Cynthia Tucker, who is the editorial page editor of the Atlanta Constitution. For the purposes of history and the subject of this book, it must be noted that Tucker is an African-American.

Scholars will delight in the bibliography and essays that place the columns in context. And a list ("Cast of Characters") helps the casual dancer with American history to understand who did what.

In short, the book serves not only as a source of inspiration, but a gold mine of references and ideas for others.

*Joe Marren is an assistant professor in the communication department at Buffalo State College. He can be reached at [marrenjj@buffalostate.edu](mailto:marrenjj@buffalostate.edu).*